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stellar

“Being seen as
a diva
was my worst
nightmare”

MEGAN GALE ON MEN,
MARRIAGE, MOTHERHOOD
– AND REGRETS

Carrie Bickmore ★ **BEAU RYAN** ★ **Georgie Parker** ★ **EMMA HUSAR**
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**“LOSING MY
LOOKS IS
NOT MY
BIGGEST
FEAR”**

**DURING AN EXCLUSIVE SHOOT IN NEW ZEALAND,
MODEL MEGAN GALE TALKS ABOUT BEING
MISUNDERSTOOD BY THE PUBLIC, THE FILM
CAREER THAT COULD HAVE BEEN AND HER
REAL FEELINGS ON GROWING OLDER**

Photography DAVID MANDELBERG Styling GEMMA KEIL Creative Direction ALEKSANDRA BEARE Words JORDAN BAKER

Babies are egalitarians. They don't care if mum is a household name, or if dad is a famous sportsman; they cry and feed without fear or favour. Just ask Megan Gale, who found herself as raggedly tired, stressed and lonely as any new mother after she gave birth to her son River.

It was footy season, so her partner, AFL star Shaun Hampson, had one day off for River's birth. Her mother was in Perth looking after Gale's late father, who had cancer. Hampson's own dad had died a month before River arrived, and his mum was still grieving. Gale tried to soldier on alone. "I got so sleep deprived I was a bit bonkers, and was not happy," she recalls. "I was thankful and loving the fact that I was a mum, but I wasn't myself. I wonder now whether I had a touch of PND [postnatal depression]."

"I started well on my first month of breastfeeding, then my flow was all over the shop. I couldn't get him back on the boob. I was berating myself and crying when I had to give formula. I'd pump, I'd feed, I'd settle him, he'd sleep. And when he slept I would pump. It was horrible."

That Gale sat sobbing over a breast pump isn't unusual - most mums can relate. What surprises is her willingness to talk about it. Celebrities rarely share their struggles in this Instagram-perfect era, yet Gale speaks candidly about much that others won't: her health, parenting

challenges and career disappointments. She doesn't drip with labels. She eats carbs. She has a broad accent and a hearty laugh. Gale has long been known for her beauty, but her most attractive feature might just be her honesty.

GALE SITS INSIDE a luxury private property near Kerikeri on New Zealand's North Island, watching rain descend on the sweeping cliffs outside. She is in a robe, waiting for a break so she can run outside for *Stellar's* shoot. She looks down at her swollen belly - she is nearly six months pregnant - and declares to the crew, "Let's just do it. Come on, bub!"

Upon reaching the rolling hills of Rangihoua Heritage Park, overlooking the bay below where her Maori ancestors may once have fished, Gale flicks the switch: she charms the camera, oblivious to the elements. Once the first shot is nailed, a stylist swoops in to pull a second outfit over the first. Again, Gale turns it on and transforms. It's like there is nothing she'd rather do, nowhere else she'd rather be.

The shoot done, we retire to her hotel room. Gale has been a good sport since the start of the day - she had pregnancy reflux at midnight, make-up at dawn, a shoot in windswept surroundings and now an interview, nearly 12 hours later. She doesn't seem like the same woman who was rumoured to be a diva.

Around 2011, there were whispers of temper tantrums and even reports she

refused to meet others' eyes on jobs. Were they unfounded - or has she changed? Gale sighs and shakes her head. "[Those stories] blindsided me. I don't know how or why it started. The only thing I could pinpoint it on was perhaps when I started seeing Shaun, [it] wasn't long after I broke up with [comedian] Andy Lee. I'd just started doing *Project Runway Australia*. I had a lot of media to do.

"They wanted me to push the show, but all anyone wanted to talk about was Andy and Shaun. I had to do my job and be professional. I wanted to protect my new partner. I still had a lot of respect for Andy - I wanted to protect *him*. I was in a position where I had to shut it down. As a result there was probably a perception I was putting a wall up, but it was the best I could do at the time."

The public was fond of Gale and Lee as a couple. Was she being punished? "It's hard to say," Gale replies. "Maybe. It's lovely that people buy into the idea of those positive aspects of your life, but at the end of the day, it shouldn't matter."

The rumours were damaging. Gale describes how the public cooled. "Just how people engaged with me was different - more aloof, pulled back. People interviewed me differently - I felt like I was being provoked at times.

"I prided myself on treating a crew as one team: 'I'm not special here...' [I was] so far the opposite to [the reports], that was what really hurt - 'I am not that girl,

now I am being painted as that girl.' It was my worst nightmare."

Gale has long since moved on from that difficult year. She's still on good terms with Lee - "We have great respect for each other, he's an amazing guy" - and has now been with Richmond Tigers ruckman Hampson for six years.

There was fuss about their 13-year age difference when they got together, but Gale, 41, says "that all shifted when I became pregnant. It was less 'a fling with a younger guy' and more 'they are a family'." She says the only time she notices an age gap is when her gadgets die. "He's more tech-savvy than me!"

Asked about the prospect of marriage, Gale tells *Stellar* they have no firm plans in place. "It's a really lovely thing to do to celebrate your love and your relationship, but at the end of the day - not that I'm an anti-romantic; I love weddings - but to me, creating human lives together, that's for life. You've bonded in the most incredible way, so to start a family is more of a commitment than walking down the aisle.

"If we do celebrate our love in that way and formalise it and legalise it, it will be great, but I feel the commitment we have already taken far exceeds that."

Career-wise, the couple are a good fit. Modelling is not unlike sport: one minute you're up, the next you're down, and a long career requires resilience. So

Gale can empathise with Hampson's match-winning highs and painful lows. "When they are losing [or] injured, especially when you see it happen, you see them disappear into the rooms and you don't know what's going on," she says.

Adds Hampson: "Countless times post-injury she has nursed me when I've been unable to care for myself and has been there as a psychological support as well."

"I was loving being a mum, but I wasn't myself. I wonder now whether I had postnatal depression"

Hampson is a hands-on dad, and no matter how tiring his day, always has energy to rumble with his boy. He looks after River on his day off, and together the couple manage so they rarely need a babysitter. They are deep in the parental trenches, and Gale is now encountering some of its politics.

Take playgrounds. Hampson and Gale are not smackers, but will send River to timeout when needed. "From early on, we disciplined him; we are big on good manners." Other parents aren't as keen on authority, and Gale is

discovering the dilemmas that can cause. Recently, a kid threw a handful of sand in River's face. The child's parent had no response. "If River had done that, I would have given him an absolute earful," she says. "I have seen a kid get him in a headlock, pinch him and wallop him, and there's no disciplining going on! I'm at the point where I want to almost tell off someone else's child, but I feel that is overstepping the mark."

The gap between her kids' ages will be bigger than planned. Last year Gale fell pregnant again; in June, while filming *Australia's Next Top Model*, she miscarried at nine weeks. She decided not to try again immediately, owing to "the worst health period I've had". When she felt better in January, Gale became pregnant straight away. The first few months were difficult because of their loss, but now the bump is growing and kicking nicely. The couple know the sex, but intend to keep that a secret.

Gale is not freaking out about having a second child. "People have three, four, eight - humans are adaptable, we get by." Things will be easier this time. It will be the off-season, so Hampson will be around more. "Megan's an amazing mum and took to it so naturally," he tells *Stellar*. ▶

MEGAN WEARS

Max Mara coat, world.maxmara.com; Intropia knit, (02) 9328 9755; KitX skirt, kitx.com.au; Christian Louboutin shoes, (02) 8355 5282

MEGAN WEARS

Jac + Jack coat,
jacandjack.com;
Country Road dress,
countryroad.com.au;
Christian Louboutin
shoes, (02) 8355 5282

“My mother is from New Zealand, I have an amazing heritage, and it’s a beautiful country”

SHOT ON LOCATION at The Landing, located in the Bay of Islands in the far north of New Zealand’s North Island. The 400-hectare property comprises six private beaches, an award-winning vineyard, lush wetlands and four residences positioned through the property. For more information, visit newzealand.com/au.

"She's so caring and protective and River's face lights up when she enters the room."

This time around, Gale is changing her approach. "I should have asked [for help] more [with River]," she says. "We don't - we think we have to do it all; there's a level of guilt from handing it over. This time I'm much more prepared."

Gale begins six months of maternity leave in August. Until then, she will stay busy with roles including Tourism New Zealand's official ambassador in Australia. The appointment is a natural fit as Gale has a personal connection to the country - her mother, May, is part-Maori, and bequeathed Gale the dark colouring many incorrectly assume is Italian. "I am a believer in not just doing things for the pay cheque," Gale says. "This wasn't one of those things where you are clutching at straws - my mum is from here, I have an amazing heritage, and it's a beautiful country."

May is from the Ngāti Kahu Iwi tribe. She grew up in Kaitaia, close to the Bay of Islands, where her daughter is shooting for *Stellar*. This section of the Northland coastline is an historically significant region, and a spectacular one; it was the first place in New Zealand settled by Europeans. It's also close to Waitangi, the site of the first treaty between Maori chiefs and the British.

Gale hasn't been to her mother's birthplace; for years, neither has May, who settled in Perth and married Gale's father decades ago. Gale suggested a family visit to the region during a last-minute holiday to New Zealand with Hampson and River last year, but May demurred, so the family of three went without her. "She said it's somewhat a pilgrimage for her - it's significant to go back, especially as a family," Gale says. "With the Maoris as well, there's a bit of a rite of passage, checking in with people in the area. She wanted to do it the appropriate way, which I respected. I'd like to try to hold off [visiting her village] until I can go with her."

Gale has long since commenced the transition from model to businesswoman. Her career is diverse - ambassadorships, a judge on *Australia's Next Top Model* and a business venture that remains secret for now. Unlike many whose face is their fortune, Gale doesn't seem worried about getting older. "One would probably make the assumption that [being a model] my biggest fear would be losing my looks...

it's not," she says. "What scares me more than anything is losing my health, losing my mind, losing my body's ability. Having seen my dad and Shaun's dad go through disease... that stuff scares me."

She is keen to do more acting, and admits the success of *Wonder Woman* is bittersweet, since it was the role she was set to play in director George Miller's planned Justice League franchise a decade ago, before it was shelved. "I'd be lying if I said it wasn't," she says. "She's such a great role model for women, I am happy it's doing well. But I'll always wonder what our version would have been like."



MEGAN WEARS

By Malene Birger coat, (02) 9328 9755; Paris Georgia Basics dress, mychameleon.com.au

Left: Megan Gale and her partner Shaun Hampson. Below: with son River.

HAIR Sara Allsop
MAKE-UP Leisa Welch



IN MAY, RIVER turned three. Already, Gale and Hampson are being asked if he'll be a model or a footballer. The answer is no and no - unless it's something he wants. "[River] could be the best footballer on the planet in 20 years but that will be his choosing," she says. "Shaun has seen how hard it is. Shaun's body is broken. He's 29. He's going to be riddled with arthritis. We don't want that for our son, necessarily."

"Same for modelling. I loved my career, I'm thankful for it. It has been amazing. But it has been hard, and I've had some horrible experiences. At least I am armed with that knowledge, and can guide them in that world."

Beauty is nice, says Gale, but it's no substitute for character. "It's nice [River] is a pleasant-looking child. I don't want him to think that's something... I try to discourage that kind of talk. You are lucky you are appealing to look at. But it's not the be-all and end-all." ★

OTHER PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES, INSTAGRAM